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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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SLAVE LABOR IN THE SOVIET UNION

Many people associate Soviet slave labor camps with the era of Joseph Stalin or Nikita Khrushchev. Unfortunately, life inside the Soviet Union has not changed nearly as much as our image of it. A new report to Congress reveals that approximately 4 million human beings are part of the Russian forced labor system.

I am not using the word "slavery" as a loose metaphor or symbolic expression. The use of slave labor in the Soviet Union is similar to the use of slaves in the American South before the Civil War. The victims are denied all vestiges of human dignity. They are regarded as easily manipulated skillful beasts of burden.

Who are the slaves in the Soviet Union? The majority of them are common criminals often guilty of nothing more than minor offenses. They are enslaved not because their deeds warrant such stern punishment, but because the men who rule over them cannot resist the opportunity to acquire low paid laborers.

Among the 4 million Soviet slaves there are tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience. These individuals are being punished for pursuing their own religious and ethical beliefs. As is well known, many of the slaves are Soviet Jews who have sought to emigrate to Israel or have been involved in underground schools where Hebrew language and literature is taught. Still, others have been "apprehended" for observing certain Mitzvot. Many Jews have been sent to slave labor camps for having observed Jewish holidays or having made secret arrangements for Brit Milah for their sons or their grandsons.

Nothing could be more misleading than to depict Jews as the only targets of religious persecution. The leaders and faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church have reached a fairly stable working relationship with the Communist government. However, evangelical Protestants suffer in a state of perpetual conflict with the regime.

In every slave labor camp one can find Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and other Christians who have been unwilling to reach a compromise with their fiercely atheist rulers.

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I find it disturbing that American Protestants have generally shown little interest in the fate of their co-religionists in the Soviet Union. Across the so-called "Bible Belt" there are many ostensibly pious evangelical Protestants who appear to be more interested in selling grain to the Russians than in using trade as a weapon to win concessions on human rights.

It is particularly sad to read of the plight of approximately 50,000 Vietnamese laborers now working as slaves in the USSR or one of the Soviet satellites. The Vietnamese are officially entitled to the same "nominal pay" as other workers receive. However, they never receive even these tiny amounts. Most of their pay is deducted--ostensibly so that it can be "credited" to the accounts of what Vietnam "owes" the Soviet Union as a result of Soviet assistance during the war in Vietnam.

Not all Soviet slave laborers are criminals, religious dissidents, or political opponents of the regime. Some are just forlorn individuals who were unable to adjust to Soviet work life. Any one who does not take and maintain the job he or she is assigned, is liable to be prosecuted for "parasitism". This broad category includes everyone from artists and poets to emotionally disturbed people to retarded or disabled people whose "excuses" for not being "productive" have been rejected.

I strongly favor improved US-Soviet relations. I have worked and will continue to work for a freeze on nuclear weapons and long-term agreements for reduced armaments of every kind. As we deal with the Soviets on these and other topics of mutual concern, we must never lose sight of the enormous amount of human suffering Soviet leaders have brought to their own people.

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